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Flusser and French Theory

“Saussure did not impress me.”¹ So wrote Flusser in the 1969 essay “In Search of Meaning (Philosophical Self-portrait),” before he returned to Europe and settled for the last decades of his life in France. Rather than Francophone writers – and particularly Saussure, the linguist and figurehead of a strain of language philosophy that would guide French thought in the twentieth century – Flusser acknowledged a host of other thinkers: Kant, Camus, José Ortega y Gasset, Nietzsche, Cassirer, Cohen, Hartmann, the entire Marburg School, the Viennese School, Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Goethe, Thomas Mann, and particularly Kafka and Rilke. In other words, practically anything *but* French writers. However, the last two decades of Flusser’s life brought him in close contact with French thinkers, from Abraham Moles to Jean Baudrillard. Moreover, his increasing contact with German media theory and the U.S. art world, which was besotted with French “theory” (a designation I will explain in a moment) were crucial to his legacy. Paradoxically, even though Flusser’s reception lagged in France, I would argue that his importance is in large part due to the avenues opened up by French theory and the “model” – one of Flusser’s favorite terms – for his own visionary thinking.

First, French “theory.” Anaël Lejeune, Olivier Mignon, and Raphaël Pirenne write that French theory refers “roughly to the structuralist and post-structuralist thought that developed in France from the 1960s to the 1980s” and which should be differentiated from “French thought.”¹ French theory, as opposed to French thought, offered a degree of heterogeneity and intellectual freedom – which is why it was largely adopted by radical thinkers, in the vein of Flusser. (François Cusset describes it as “this weird textual American object known as *theory*, born between the two world wars or the crazy 1970s, depending on historical accounts, but definable today as a strange breed of academic market rules, French (and more generally continental) detachable concepts, campus-based identity politics, and trendy pop culture.”)²

Despite postwar frictions, French theory’s influence was long reaching. In Germany, where Flusser was first celebrated – his archive is in Berlin – he was read and promoted by photography

¹ Anaël Lejeune, Olivier Mignon, and Raphaël Pirenne, “French Theory and American Art: An Introduction,” *French Theory and American Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 9. See also Étienne Balibar and John Rajchman, eds., *French Philosophy Since 1945: Problems, Concepts, Inventions* (New York: New Press, 2011).

² François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press), xi.

editors and media theorists who embraced his technical image writings. Among the most influential of these figures was Friedrich Kittler, who pushed the boundaries of German academic writing, employing the jump-cuts of cinema and using free association and automatic writing. In attempting to push the field of media theory and add rigor to Marshall McLuhan's popular writing and memes like "the medium is the message," Kittler turned to recent French theory: Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida. Kittler's texts drew criticism, being called a "theoretical fantasy literature" that read as if he was writing "not to communicate, but to amuse himself."³

In the U.S., Flusser's reception was through two avenues, both heavily influenced by French theory: photography theory within art history, and the U.S. art world. Cusset argues that, in the late seventies and early eighties, there was not much French art in U.S. art magazines, but lots of French theory.⁴ Roland Barthes' writings on photography, starting in the sixties with essays like "The Rhetoric of the Image" (1964) – and heavily influenced by the semiotics kicked off by Saussure's lectures in the earlier part of the century – and culminating with *Camera Lucida* (1980), were embraced, particularly by the *October* group of art historians and critics, who were trying to reshape art writing from the positivist approach of critics like Clement Greenberg. (Annette Michelson, a co-founder of *October* who lived in France for approximately fifteen years, is often credited with the journal's Francophile-approach – although others trace the influence back to the fifties and even the mutual love affair between France and the Kennedys.) Moreover, writing about the U.S. publisher Sylvère Lotringer and his press Semiotext(e), which brought much of the French writing to the North America, Tim Griffin, a former editor of *Artforum*, argues that Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, and Foucault sounded like "science fiction in Europe but were the stuff of everyday life in the United States."⁵ (Derrida put it this way: "America is deconstruction.")⁶ Flusser was brought into *Artforum* in 1986 with a number of these thinkers.

Flusser's rise as a theorist of photography – but, more precisely, *technical* and later *synthetic* images – naturally begs his comparison to Roland Barthes. Photography writing and scholarship was

³ Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, "Translators' Introduction" in Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), xxxii.

⁴ "From Soho, which was already on its way to becoming institutionalized, to the improvised galleries and militant bohemian squats in the East Village, a few key texts were being circulated: Barthes's *Mythologies*, for an understanding of how brands and labels functioned as social myths; *The Mirror of Production* (which had a significant impact on the sociofeminist artist Barbara Kruger) and *The Consumer Society* by Baudrillard, to glean the tools provided by a critical semiology; and even Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, to see oneself reflected in his political theory concerning the margins of society." Cusset, *French Theory*, 234.

⁵ Tim Griffin, "Theoretical Physic," *Artforum* (April 2010), <http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201004&id=25161>.

⁶ Quoted in Anaël Lejeune, Olivier Mignon, and Raphaël Pirenne, "French Theory and American Art: An Introduction," 11.

flourishing in the seventies and Flusser gravitated towards it in the same way he had migrated toward the art world in São Paulo in the sixties and early seventies. Interviewed three days before his death in 1980, Roland Barthes noted, “there does seem to be a kind of ‘theoretical boom’ in photography ... People who are not technicians, historians, or aestheticians are becoming interested in it.”⁷ Barthes started writing about photography in the fifties and sixties. In essays like “Photography and the Electoral Appeal” and “Shock-Photos”—both included in *Mythologies* (1957)—as well as “The Photographic Message” (1961) and “Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), Barthes used methods drawn from structural linguistics, semiotics, and Brechtian Marxism to demonstrate how everyday images function like sign systems, containing ideological messages that aren’t immediately apparent. Drawing from Ferdinand Saussure’s writings on linguistics, which he had used to examine everything from literature to the fashion system, Barthes described different levels of photographic meaning: the *denotative* level, which was essentially descriptive, and the *connotative* level, which created a “rhetoric of the image” that both relies on and bolsters particularly cultural and historical contexts. In 1980, Barthes published *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, his only book dedicated to photography, and the one that has dominated worldwide photography discourse at the end of the twentieth century.⁸ Influenced particularly by Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “A Little History of Photography,” which he used as a template, it was a slim volume resulting from a commission by *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*. The book signals a move away from structuralism toward poststructuralism—and beyond. *Camera Lucida* is a strongly autobiographical response to photography—arguably representing even a return to the humanism Barthes’s earlier structuralist and semiotic work critiqued. Following the writing method used in *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977), it also represents the development for Barthes of a “third form” of writing—what scholars have called “paracriticism” or “paraliterature” – similar to what Flusser would adopt in his “parabiology” *Vampyrotenhis infernalis*.⁹

⁷ Roland Barthes interviewed by Laurent Dispot, *Le Matin*, February 22, 1980, in Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill & Wang, 1985), 351.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). Originally published as *La chambre claire : Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, Gallimard, Seuil, 1980).

⁹ Nancy Shawcross describes Barthes’ late writing as a “third form,” between essay and novel, in *Roland Barthes on Photography: The Critical Tradition in Perspective* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997). Here she is borrowing Barthes’s use of the term “third form” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1986), 281. Ulmer calls the same body of Barthes’s writing a “third front” of criticism in “The Discourse of the Imaginary,” *Diacritics* 10 (1980): 67; Emma Kafalenos calls it “paracriticism” (see Kafalenos, “Fragments of a Partial Discourse on Roland Barthes and the Postmodern Mind,” *Chicago Review* 35, no. 2 [Winter, 1985], 72-94). Rosalind Krauss compared *The Pleasure of the Text*, *A Lover’s Discourse*, and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* to the writings of Jacques Derrida, arguing that both writers were working in a form somewhere between literature and criticism that she called “paraliterature.” Rosalind Krauss, “Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 292.

Unlike Barthes, Flusser's photography writing initially coalesced around four key terms, defined in a "Lexicon of Basic Concepts" at the back of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983): *image*, *apparatus*, *program*, and *information*. Where Barthes described photographs as having both a connotative and a denotative meaning, Flusser disputes this, comparing images instead to numbers, mirroring cybernetic and information theory. "Magic" also becomes an important term for Flusser, suggesting that the effect of existing in his "photographic universe" is to be caught up in the magic spell of images. Flusser's immediate concern with magic is causality and the structuring of time and consciousness. Causality has been altered and Flusser feels that the photographic universe has programmed us to think functionally instead; reasoning now happens the same way it occurs in other fields like psychology, biology, linguistics, cybernetics, and informatics. We, as humans, produced tools modeled after our own bodies—then the tools became models for us and society. These ideas would be played out further in *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985) and *Does Writing Have a Future?* (1987), which would further distinguish Flusser from Barthes in terms of their approach to photography/technical images. Moreover, in titling the Portuguese version of *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* as he did – *Filosofia da Caixa Preta: Ensaios para uma Futura Filosofia da Fotografia* (Philosophy of the Black Box: Essays for a Future Philosophy of Photography) – Flusser was nodding more to Foucault and his ideas of apparatuses – as well as other French thinkers, from Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses to Tiqqun – which distinguished him from the hermeneutic, semiotic, and literary-theory-inflected style of Barthes' approach.¹⁰

In "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object" (1986), published in the U.S. journal *Leonardo*, Flusser would either directly or obliquely address Barthes – as well as two other French thinkers who were important in his later thinking: Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard. In a letter to Lisa Bornstein at *Leonardo*, responding to a peer-reviewer's comments, Flusser explains his approach, which mirrors that of many French theorists:

The reviewer of my text wants me to quote from the large literature on photography, which is exactly what I wanted to avoid, since I believe that the current writing on this subject (especially Roland Barthes and his followers), misses the point I am driving. Indeed, I want the reader to think that I reinvented the wheel, although in an ironical way ... Indeed, I have done some reading (as the reviewer so kindly says), but that fact should come out from the text, not from pseudo-academic footnotes. If

¹⁰ Vilém Flusser, *Filosofia da Caixa Preta: Ensaios para uma Futura Filosofia da Fotografia* (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1985). See also see Tiqqun's "As a Science of Apparatuses," *This is Not a Program* (New York: Semiotext(e)/Intervention Series, 2011), 135-204, which takes its epigraph from Reiner Schürmann's "What is to be done with the end of metaphysics?" in *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 5-6.

there is anything an essay should avoid (in opposition to a scientific treatise), it is precisely this sort of preciousness.¹¹

Flusser's essay, then, is in response to Barthes (and Benjamin), but applying information theory to the analysis of photography. In the fifth section of the essay, "Photos," Flusser addresses Barthes, whom Flusser felt was "missing the point." It is a provocative section. Flusser declares photographs "practically worthless supports of information" and a few sentences later amplifies this point: "Photos and printed matter have the following in common: both can become a nuisance by creating waste material. However, in printed matter a human subject, an 'author,' elaborates the information (unless a word processor is used), while in the photo an apparatus does."¹² Instead of focusing on images, Flusser argues that post-industrial culture in general can be grasped better by focusing on the camera and apparatus, which he describes as a "machine that calculates probabilities."¹³

The last sections of the essay are given over to suggesting how the new electromagnetic photos—examples are in "Les Immatériaux," borrowed from the titled of the 1985 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris co-curated by Jean-François Lyotard, which showcased satellite images, holograms, and other types of digital images alongside "new materials" used in agriculture, biotechnology, and other fields. "Post-industrial objects," Flusser writes, "will differ from industrial ones in that they will become almost 'value-less' supports for programmed information."¹⁴ Flusser also writes in his footnotes – unusual for his texts but requested by *Leonardo* – that the last section of the essay was written in preparation for a discussion with Jean Baudrillard on German television scheduled for February 26, 1986.¹⁵ This conversation never occurred, but it is a rare and important acknowledgement of Baudrillard's importance for Flusser, that he would want to name-check the French philosopher.

"On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise)," also published in *Leonardo* and in German, makes these points clear.¹⁶ What is interesting about "On Memory" is that it essentially recasts much of the argument of "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object" into the idea of "electronic memory." Read

¹¹ Letter from Vilém Flusser to Lisa Bornstein, December 18, 1985, *Leonardo* Correspondence Binder, No. 10., Vilém Flusser Archive.

¹² Flusser, "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object," 330.

¹³ Flusser, "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object," 330.

¹⁴ Flusser, "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object," 330.

¹⁵ Vilém Flusser, "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs," *Leonardo* 19, no. 4 (1986): 331-332. Also published as "Die Fotografie als nach-industrieller Gegenstand" in *FotoKritik* 21-22 (November 1986): 14-17.

¹⁶ Vilém Flusser, "On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise)," *Leonardo* 23, no. 4 (1990): 397-399. The correspondence in the archive shows that Flusser had also submitted other essays to *Leonardo*, including "Plant Life" and "Grandmother," neither of which were accepted.

alongside his photography writings, it is interesting to see how Flusser changes the terms of photography from remembrance (Barthes continually refers to Proust, although he argues the photograph is more a resurrection of the dead than a “remembrance”) to information storage.¹⁷ Electronic memories are also described as “simulations,” which clearly invokes Baudrillard and theories of communication rather than photography, *per se* (even though Baudrillard actually was a photographer).

In the seventies, Flusser’s contemporaries were defining themselves in contrast to Marshall McLuhan. Baudrillard and Hans Magnus Enzensberger – with whom Flusser participated in the “Open Circuits” conference at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1974 where Flusser presented “Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television” – launched attacks on McLuhan, although from different positions. Enzensberger approached television from a class perspective, as a tool for “controlling the behavior of the population.”¹⁸ Enzensberger was concerned with a “reversibility of circuits”: if a socialist strategy was applied to the media, one might be able to change network communications. Examples of this included a mass newspaper, written and distributed by its readers or a video network of politically active groups.¹⁹ Baudrillard wasn’t so optimistic. Heavily influenced by Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Baudrillard supplemented Marx with semiology to analyze postwar culture and consumer society. In “Requiem for the Media,” which appeared in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), Baudrillard criticized McLuhan as well as Enzensberger, arguing that: “There is no theory of the media. The ‘media revolution’ has remained empirical and mystical, as much in the work of McLuhan as with his opponents.”²⁰ For Baudrillard, the media are not *co-efficients*, but *effectors* of ideology. Anticipating the concepts he became most associated with, *simulation* and the *simulacra*, Baudrillard writes that the existing communications theory model is “rooted in a *simulation model* of communication. It excludes, from its inception, the reciprocity and antagonism of interlocutors, and the ambivalence of their exchange.”²¹

Baudrillard would soon step away from Marxism, developing a theory of simulation and the simulacra that was ardently pessimistic. His 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulations*, published in English in 1983 would most impact the U.S. art world.²² Echoing Eco’s “Travels in Hyperreality” (1975), which

¹⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 82.

¹⁸ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Television and the Politics of Liberation,” *The New Television, a Public/Private Art: Essays, Statements, and Videotapes Based on “Open Circuits, an International Conference on the Future of Television* (1974), ed. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1977), 248-261..

¹⁹ Enzensberger, “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” *The New Media Reader*, 267.

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, “Requiem for the Media,” *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), 165. Originally published as *Pour une critique de l’économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

²² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983). Originally published as *Simulacres et simulations* (Paris: Galilée, 1981). “The Precession of Simulacra,” the opening chapter of

looked at the United States through holograms, superheroes, and amusement parks like Disneyland, Baudrillard described the simulacrum—the copy with no original, in which signs of the real stand in for the real itself—as existing in a state of *hyperreality*.²³ Experiences of entertainment, information, and communication technology that are more intense and absorbing than everyday life are examples of hyperreality—but they also structure human thought and behavior. In “The Ecstasy of Communication” (1983), which was reprinted in Hal Foster’s *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, another book that helped define postmodernism for U.S. art audiences, Baudrillard argues that production and consumption have given way to networks, contacts, feedback, and communication.²⁴ The screen and the network are hallmarks of our new existence: an “interrupted interface.”²⁵ Rather than communication, however, Baudrillard sees this as a “private telematics” in which the television is still paradigmatic.²⁶

One can see the similarities with Flusser in terms of telematics and screens. However, whereas for Flusser the screen was an intersubjective medium where we see the face of the other – predicting communication platforms like Skype or FaceTime – for Baudrillard the screen is the site of a “private telematics” in which the television is paradigmatic. Baudrillard’s totalizing regime, the hyperreality of images, also sounds somewhat like Flusser’s universe of technical images, although Flusser didn’t believe that images replaced the real. In fact, he distinctly disagreed with Baudrillard’s diagnosis, arguing that the known world has always existed as a simulacrum and that reality as a whole cannot be known.²⁷ The similarities between Baudrillard and Flusser run deeper, though. Like Flusser, Baudrillard had also written about objects: in 1968 he published *The System of Objects*. Unlike Flusser’s phenomenological approach, Baudrillard’s analysis was from a Neo-Marxist perspective, drawing on Freud and Saussure to offer a critique of the commodity in consumer society, particularly of functional and non-functional and “schizofunctional” objects, which aligned him with thinkers like Jacques Ellul, Jurgen Habermas, and Guy Debord.²⁸ Flusser called his writing “science fiction philosophy,” while Baudrillard’s hyperreality even served as inspiration for actual science fiction: a copy of *Simulations* appears at the beginning

Simulations, was included in the popular U.S. anthology, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis and Marcia Tucker (New York: New Museum, 1984), which helped define the terms of so-called postmodernism.

²³ “Holography could prosper only in America, a country obsessed with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a ‘real’ copy of the reality being represented.” Umberto Eco, “Travels in Hyperreality,” *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 4.

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication,” trans. John Johnson, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 126-134.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 126-127

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁷ See Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser: An Introduction*, 110.

²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 2006).

of the movie “The Matrix.”²⁹ Both Flusser and Baudrillard critiqued history or called an end to it: Flusser’s rupture pivoted around text (history) and image (post-history) while Baudrillard’s progressed from pre-modern (“primitive”) societies organized around symbolic exchange to modern societies organized around production to postmodern societies organized around media and simulation. For Baudrillard, television, cyberspace, and virtual reality were the postmodern; technology (images and information) replaced capital and simulation and the play of signs replaced the production of commodities.³⁰ In Flusser, we saw the progression from idolatry to “textolatry” and finally the world of technical images. In Baudrillard there are successive phases of the image: first it is the reflection of a basic reality; then it “masks and perverts a basic reality”; then it “masks the *absence* of a basic reality”; and finally, under the regime of hyperreality, “it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.”³¹

Baudrillard was also a practicing photographer, although he claimed it was merely a “diversion or hobby.”³² His writings on photography are also somewhat odd. Although he participated in a 1978 French conference with Flusser on the image, he didn’t write much on photography until later in the eighties.³³ In essays like “Xerox and Infinity” and “Radical Exoticism” he claimed photography’s “affinity with everything that is savage and primitive, and with that most essential of exoticisms, the exoticism of the Object, of the Other,” but in keeping with his theories of hyperreality, he constructed photography as an illusion, a fiction.³⁴ Unlike Flusser, Baudrillard does not factor the digital revolution into his formulations. However, in an interview Baudrillard suggested that, if had he spent more time thinking about photography, it might have affected his thinking around technology, a site that instigates an “inversion of the relationship between the subject and the object.”³⁵

For U.S. writers and artists in the eighties, however, Baudrillard’s apocalyptic vision was key.

²⁹ Cusset, *French Theory*, 254, 259.

³⁰ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London and New York: MacMillan and Guilford Press, 1991); *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997); and *The Postmodern Adventure* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).

³¹ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 11.

³² See also “The Ecstasy of Photography,” Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg, *Jean Baudrillard: Art and Artifact*, ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 32; Jean Baudrillard, *Fotografien 1985-1998* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 1999).

³³ French Conferences Binders 3 and 4, Vilém Flusser Archive.

³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, “Radical Exoticism,” *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomenon* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 151.

³⁵ “having reconsidered technology in terms of photography, I’m beginning to formulate another hypothesis—I’m asking myself if technology isn’t the site of an inversion of the relationship between the subject and the object. Rather than thinking of technology as the site of a subject which, by means of technology, masters the world, captures the world and so on, I’m beginning to wonder if—almost ironically or paradoxically—technology may not prove to be the site where the world or the object plays with the subject.” Baudrillard interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg, “The Ecstasy of Photography,” *Jean Baudrillard: Art and Artifact*, 38.

This is another area where Baudrillard and Flusser overlap: both were adopted by the U.S. art world—and particularly by *Artforum* magazine—except that Baudrillard became one of the most important voices in U.S. art of that period while Flusser’s impact was minor. According to Sylvère Lotringer, the 1983 promotional tour for *Simulations* attracted only a handful of students at universities, and so they considered targeting curators and artists. Soon everyone was reading Baudrillard and using him in their work. The New York art-world’s embrace of Baudrillard climaxed, however, with two lectures—one at the Whitney Museum and one at Columbia University—in 1987, in which Baudrillard denounced his U.S. followers, claiming that simulation “couldn’t be represented” and that U.S. artists were misrepresenting his ideas.³⁶

Baudrillard’s 1991 book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* was a symptom of his “apolitical”—or perhaps tone-deaf—stance. In it, he argued that the war took place through the mediation of television screens—that in the new era of war, the fight was basically virtual: images rather than events were “real.” And yet, as one biographical assessment states: “Baudrillard has had a particularly poor record as a social and political analyst and forecaster. As a political analyst, Baudrillard has often been superficial and off the mark.”³⁷ Flusser tended not to tie his theories to specific political events. The one contemporary event he wrote about was the 1989 Romanian coup and televised assassination of Nicolae Ceaușescu – not to claim that it was an illusion or didn’t take place, but to underscore what he had previously argued: that text culture (“history”) was being eclipsed by image culture, marking the beginning of post-history, and that the televised execution of Ceaușescu was evidence of this unfolding, increasingly, on television.³⁸

Closer to Flusser in this regard, in thinking about images and politics are Paul Virilio and Gilles Deleuze. Virilio argued, as Flusser (and Kittler) did, that military conflict drives technological innovation and has epistemological effects. Virilio initially viewed this phenomenon in terms of speed. In *Speed and Politics* (1977), he put forward the term *dromology*, the phenomenon of speed, arguing that speed more than technology, *per se*, has impacted society and history—and particularly the speed of

³⁶ Cusset, *French Theory*, 238. Baudrillard had also been put on the masthead of *Artforum* as a contributing editor, without being consulted—when he wasn’t even particularly familiar with the magazine.

³⁷ “Jean Baudrillard” entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, posted March 2007, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/#Bib>. In an *Artforum* obituary following Baudrillard’s death in 2007, Lotringer wrote, “Félix [Guattari] condemned his fatalism and irresponsible politics, not realizing that Jean was political, if in very different ways: He was a historian of the future, looking back from the end of the world at contemporary society.” Sylvère Lotringer, “Passages: Jean Baudrillard,” *Artforum* (Summer 2007), <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=200706&id=15371>.

³⁸ Vilém Flusser, “Das Politische im Zeitalter der technischen Bilder,” *Volkszeitung*, August 17, 1990.

transmission in technologies from transportation to communication.³⁹ Speed is not merely a theme; it's a structuring principle in how we experience space and the world. Virilio's writing style even reflects this, since he often omits articles and capitalizes significant terms, in the same way Flusser used quotation marks to emphasize important words and heighten his text's irony. In *The Vision Machine* (1988) and *Negative Horizon* (1984) and later works like *The Information Bomb* (1998), Virilio focused on the way new technologies, from television to satellites and video surveillance, change our understanding and experience of space.⁴⁰ Like Flusser, Virilio drew on phenomenology. However, if Flusser's project initially involved treating everyday objects as phenomenological interfaces, Virilio focused on how our experience of space is inseparable from the positioning and movement of the body in relation to its environment.⁴¹ (This extended to art. Unlike Flusser, who was involved with art as a critic, curator, and commentator Virilio was a practicing still life painter, early in his life.) For Virilio, accelerated speed leads to a loss of immediate presence and alters lived, bodily experience – the opposite of the Italian Futurists, who celebrated speed and technology. Instead, speed leads to a “decline in existence” and a crisis of dimensions and representation.

Interestingly, both Virilio and Flusser compare television to a window in a house. But where, for Flusser, television could potentially become an “improved window” for communication, for Virilio television was an emitter of “false daylight” that alters our perception of time and space and produces a misleading impression of proximity and a disconnect between direct and indirect information and experience. An example arrived to support Flusser's argument two years before his death: the 1989 Romanian revolution, in which citizens took over state-controlled television. By comparison, Ian James cites Scott McQuire's example of the television coverage of Nelson Mandela being released from prison in 1991 as “echoing Virilio”: the world's major networks showed up to broadcast Mandela's release, but the event was delayed.⁴² Instead of a celebratory event of political liberation, what was

³⁹ Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006). Originally published as *Vitesse et politique : essai de dromologie* (Paris: Galilée, 1977). Later, in an interview with Friedrich Kittler, he would state that contemporary global society had hit a “wall of acceleration.” Friedrich Kittler interview with Paul Virilio in John Armitage, *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews* (London: Sage, 2001), 97-98; quoted in Ian James, *Paul Virilio* (Abingdon, England and New York: Routledge, 2007), 30.

⁴⁰ Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2005). Originally published as *La Bombe informatique* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1998). Virilio's approach earned him the wrath of Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, who argued in *Intellectual Impostures* (1998) that Virilio's understanding of space, based on his reading of Einstein and Newton, was “confused” and “meaningless.” Other writers have countered that Sokal and Bricmont overlooked the philosophical context of Virilio's argument, which was based on phenomenology and perception. See Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (London: Profile, 1998). Quoted in James, *Paul Virilio*, 37.

⁴¹ James, *Paul Virilio*, 13.

⁴² James, *Paul Virilio*, 61-62. Also see Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity: Representation, Memory, Time and Space in the Age of the Camera* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998). In support of Virilio, James also gives the example of military conflicts in Iraq and how what one saw on television differed from what was experienced on the ground.

aired was “dead time”: a wasted moment of global connectivity with broadcasters scrambling to fill empty space and time. For Flusser, technology offered new forms of communication that could potentially lead to the “reprogramming” or dissolution of repressive apparatuses. For Virilio, technology resulted in a “market of synthetic perception” in which virtual reality dominates over actual experience, leading to a diminished existence in phenomenological space and time.⁴³ Moreover, the screen, one of Flusser’s favorite motifs, in which we might encounter the face of the Other, becomes for Virilio the site of spectacle. It is where an endless war driven by technology is played out and “the attention of each is mobilized, whether he likes it or not. The horizon of the control monitor supplants both the military communiqué and the press, that mainstream press still necessary for analysis and reflection.”⁴⁴

“Control” is also central to another French thinker with whom Flusser is less often compared, but who begs mention here. Gilles Deleuze is perhaps best known for his books co-authored with Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia Part II* (1980), which reconsidered the human subject and cultural structures, approaching them as networks of control.⁴⁵ For artists and art writers, the most popular of Deleuze and Guattari’s formulations has been the *rhizome*, derived from biology and emphasizing the expanding roots of a plant as an organizational model rather than the historically privileged genealogical tree. I will not linger on Deleuze’s notions of the rhizome or control here. Rather, I want to propose some other connections with Flusser’s thought: Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (1968), considered in philosophy circles his magnum opus;⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari’s attempt to fuse nature and culture and their emphasis on the nomadic character of knowledge and identity; their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975);⁴⁷ Flusser’s philosophy of the technical image in relation to Deleuze’s books *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*

⁴³ Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, 59.

⁴⁴ Virilio, *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*, trans. Michael Degener (London: Continuum, 2005). Quoted in James, *Paul Virilio*, 86.

⁴⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Originally published as French *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie. L’Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972); *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia Part II*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Originally published as *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie, tome 2 : Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Originally published as *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: PUF, 1968).

⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Originally published as *Kafka. pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1975).

(1983) and *Cinema II: The Time-Image* (1985);⁴⁸ and Deleuze's idea of the actual and the virtual.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it is perhaps notable that Deleuze and Flusser shared a comparable trauma in their youths: during World War II, Deleuze's brother was arrested by the Nazis in Paris for resistance-related activities and died on a train while being deported to Auschwitz, just as Flusser's family members died in the camps.

Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* might be seen as an analogue to Flusser's *On Doubt*: a similar, 1960s critique of Western philosophy and its grounding in the concept of reason. In the same way as Flusser wanted to overturn Descartes's *cogito*, a mode of thought based in certainty, *Difference and Repetition* was a rewriting of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), with an attempt to prioritize difference over identity.⁵⁰ Deleuze's goal was to reposition Kant's universal experience in actual, grounded, concrete experience—influenced, notably, by Husserl's phenomenology. Deleuze's argument also involved critiquing Kant's notion of genesis—an idea also addressed in his book *Bergsonism* (1966), on the French philosopher who had written *Creative Evolution*, and which serves as an analogue to Flusser's critiques of evolution in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* and other texts. In *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari put forth a more complex critique of the nature-culture split that has been central to Western thought for several centuries. "Everything is a machine," Deleuze and Guattari write in the opening section of *Anti-Oedipus*:

Celestial machines, the stars or rainbows in the sky, alpine machines—all of them connected ... There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.⁵¹

This is close to the Flusser of *Natural: Mind*, but also the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, who inhabits the flows of the ocean's pelagic zone. Deleuze's two books on cinema should be considered, although their approach differs considerably from Flusser's writing on the technical image. For Deleuze, cinema

⁴⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), originally published as *Cinéma 1 : l'Image-Mouvement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983), and *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), originally published as *Cinéma 2 : l'Image-temps* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985).

⁴⁹ See for instance Gilles Deleuze, "The Actual and the Virtual," *Dialogues II*, trans. Eliot Ross Albert (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press), 148-152. This is believed to be the draft of an unfinished essay or chapter. Also see Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002) and Rob Shields, *The Virtual* (New York: Routledge, 2003) and "Virtualities," *Theory Culture and Society* 23:2-3 (2006): 284-86.

⁵⁰ See Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Repetition and Difference of Deleuze* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 9.

provides a model for philosophy, much the way François Laruelle, an heir to Deleuze in contemporary French philosophy, has used photography as a philosophical model, arguing that objectivity, as posited by traditional photography narratives, does not exist.⁵² Drawing from C.S. Peirce and Henri Bergson, in *Cinema I* Deleuze argues that film is a “composition of images and signs,” a “pre-verbal intelligible context (*pure semiotics*).”⁵³ What is important here, however, is his concept of the “movement-image”: how cinema’s movement affects us perceptually. Rather than the ancient succession of images in static pictures, with film we fuse with the light and movement of the image such that, even when the film is over, we are still perceptually in motion. Hence, although film is immaterial, it can affect us materially. In *Cinema II*, Deleuze expands upon this. Only, now the movement-image is described in its postwar context as a “time-image”: the “coexistence of distinct durations” whereby a single event can belong to “several levels” or “sheets” of the past, coexisting in non-chronological order.⁵⁴ These sheets of the past, mixed with the present, result in the “virtual” and the “actual.” (Different from “virtual reality” in its conceptual rather than technical nature.) The virtual is defined in *Cinema II* as a “series of scattered images which form a large circuit,” that functions like a mirror image to the “actual” present.⁵⁵ While the legacy of Deleuze has been more prominently absorbed into Laruelle’s “fractal” philosophy, the interplay between Deleuze’s late formulations of the “actual object and the virtual image” and Flusser’s trajectory from a phenomenology of objects to a theory of immaterial images might be further explored.⁵⁶ (This is particularly true in the age of internet transmission and three-dimensional printing, in which images become objects, and *vice versa*).

One might focus on other thinkers, as well. Foucault’s ideas around power and apparatus would influence Flusser’s thinking around photography – and the idea of a media *archeology* rather than an ecology obviously comes largely from Foucault. Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* might easily be compared to Flusser’s *Universe of Technical Images* and apparatus theory. (In fact, Debord’s towering, enduring influence on contemporary art begs a chapter of its own.) François Laruelle represents a more contemporary figure: another philosopher concerned with eroding the binary nature of traditional philosophy in an attempt to produce a new utopian thought.⁵⁷ Laruelle’s interest in photography

⁵² See François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, trans. Robin Mackay (London: Urbanomic, 2011).

⁵³ Deleuze, *Cinema I*, ix.

⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, xii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁷ Although Laruelle responds very much to French strains of philosophy—reacting to and rejecting Deleuze and Alain Badiou, among others—many of the terms discussed in Alexander R. Galloway’s recent book *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (2014) echo Flusser. See Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

frames it for philosophical purposes as “non-photography” in the books *The Concept of Non-Photography* (2011) and *Photo-Fiction, a Non Standard Aesthetics* (2012);⁵⁸ and his formulation of philosophy as science fiction or a “black box.”⁵⁹ Félix Guattari and Michel Serres overlap with Flusser in their thinking around “nature” and ecologies. This idea, along with Flusser and Bec’s *Vampyroteuthis*, also parallels the writings of Fernand Deligny, another radical, alternative theorist whose writings on autistic children and animals – particularly spiders as pre-Deleuze-and-Guattari analogues for societal and technological networks – offer an alternative view of biology, behavior, language, and being.⁶⁰ More recently, Gregoire Chamayou has examined drones, echoing Flusser’s interest in automatic technology and human agency.⁶¹ However, as an initial approach to Flusser and French theory, I have focused particularly on two thinkers, Barthes and Baudrillard, to which Flusser was often compared, and a third, Deleuze, whose influence in the North American art world within which I work has endured. Further explorations of Flusser and French theory are clearly necessary, and imminent.

⁵⁸ François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2011); *Photo-Fiction, a Non Standard Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2012); and “A Light Odyssey: La découverte de la lumière comme problème théorique et esthétique” (Poitiers: Le Confort Moderne, 1991). Also see Alexander R. Galloway’s “Laruelle and Art,” *continent* 2.4 (2012): 230-236.

⁵⁹ See Galloway, *Laruelle*, 160 ; and François Laruelle, “Du noir univers [The Black Universe],” *La Décision philosophique* 5 (1988): 107-112.

⁶⁰ Fernand Deligny, *The Arachnean and Other Texts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

⁶¹ Gregoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone* (New York: The New Press, 2015).